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Improve project performance by sharing information

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By **Bonnie Biafore**

Unfortunately, people sometimes attempt to amass power by keeping information to themselves. In project management, however, the opposite approach is the most effective. Sharing project information is a source of power — the power to successfully complete a project.

When people collaborate to achieve goals, good communication contributes to success in several ways.

Benefits of collaboration

- **Improved focus on the goal** In the project world, stakeholders must define and then communicate the problem to be solved, the strategy for the solution, and what constitutes success. Team members need to know what they're supposed to do and any constraints on how they do it. If this communication is delivered effectively to the entire team, the goal and its obstacles are clearly in focus.
- **Increased productivity** Team members get more done if they can easily find the information that they need because it was clearly outlined from the start. Good communication also prevents duplication of effort, which hurts project schedules, budgets, and team morale.
- **Fewer errors** When team members have the information they need, they make fewer mistakes. When problems do arise, informed team members can quickly identify them and collaborate to fix them.
- **Better decisions** Stakeholders and team members need information to make good decisions. With project information at their disposal, people are prepared to take advantage of opportunities and to fend off threats.
- **Continuous improvement** By studying information about every project that a company executes, project teams can copy the best practices while avoiding the mistakes of previous projects.
- **Better project management** Project managers have a selfish reason for sharing information. When stakeholders and team members don't know what's going on, they're sure to ask questions — usually with a great deal of impatience, and at the worst possible moment. By distributing the information that people need to know before they need to know it, project managers can spend more time managing projects proactively.

Keeping information flowing during a project does more than guide it to a successful completion. Sharing information engenders a collaborative environment that builds teamwork and increases people's satisfaction with their work.

Who needs project information?

Stakeholders and team members hail from different groups, functional areas, business units, and organizations. Each group has its own unique information needs.

- **Customers** Customers typically have the final say about most aspects of projects: objectives, scope, budget, schedule, and success criteria. Initially, customers evaluate the project plan to ensure that it meets their needs. During project execution, customers continually review performance. Depending on their priorities, customers want to know how much progress has been made, how much money has been spent, and what results have been achieved.
- **Executives** As internal customers of projects, executives often require more information than external customers. Executives care about progress, costs, and quality, but they also must evaluate project performance compared to the entire portfolio of the enterprise's projects and the company's business objectives. Executives consider additional factors, such as returns on investment, priorities, and resource requirements across all projects, to decide whether projects should continue.
- **Functional managers** Unless an organization uses a fully project-oriented organizational structure, functional managers usually provide the resources that work on projects. Functional managers must understand the work to be performed, the skills required, when their people are needed, and any constraints on their cost. Project managers might have to fight to acquire and keep people with specialized skills. While resources are working on a project, functional managers often ask how much longer those people are needed or whether they can substitute someone else.
- **Team members** Team members must understand the work they are to perform and how that work fits into the big picture of the project. This information helps them make good decisions in their day-to-day work.
- **Project managers** Project managers need to know the most about their projects, because they are the ones ultimately responsible for keeping projects proceeding according to plan — regardless of obstacles that arise. Project managers need to compare the project plan to actual and projected performance to decide what to do. Project managers have ready access to planned values. However, unless accounting systems and project management software are integrated, acquiring up-to-date data on actual work and costs can be challenging.

The right information at the right time

Good communication is critical if you want the people on your project team to all pull in the same direction — toward project success. Sharing information isn't enough. As a project manager, you should provide people with the information that they need (not too little, not too much) when they need it. Here's a guide to the information that people need to know, subdivided by when they typically need it.

Planning

During the planning phase, stakeholders need a complete view of the proposed plan so that they can evaluate its suitability and decide whether to approve the project. Project plans typically include the following elements:

- **Problem statement** This is a definition of the problem that the project is supposed to solve, and it's the most important part of a project plan. Understanding the problem helps the project team identify the correct strategies, the budget, the required resources, and what constitutes success.
- **Project mission statement** This is a concise summary of the purpose of the project. Project team members consult this mission statement to decide whether their approaches, decisions, and activities contribute to the success of the project.
- **Project objectives** These are the goals that the project must achieve. One of the reasons that each project is unique is because of its distinctive combination of business, financial, technical, and quality objectives.
- **Project scope statement** The project scope statement states what's within the boundaries of the project and what's not. Without a project scope, controlling change is impossible, and scope creep is a certainty.
- **Project strategy** The project strategy outlines the proposed approach to solving the problem so that stakeholders can decide whether it's the best solution, given all of the project's objectives.
- **Assumptions** Documenting assumptions is one of the best ways to eliminate misunderstandings — during the course of projects or day-to-day work.
- **Deliverables and contractual requirements** A list of every deliverable helps the project team account for every aspect of the work required to complete the project. For example, omitting documentation and reporting on a government contract can lead to failure despite successful completion of all other project deliverables.
- **Success criteria** Each milestone in a project should have corresponding criteria that help project managers and customers determine whether the work that constitutes that milestone has been completed successfully.
- **Work Breakdown Structure** The Work Breakdown Structure documents all the work required to complete a project. It helps the project manager identify the resources required, estimate the project budget, and prepare a realistic schedule.
- **Project schedule** The schedule shows the tasks and milestones that make up the project, the individuals who will perform the tasks, and when the tasks should occur.
- **Project organization** People, equipment, and materials are often in short supply. Identifying the resources required for a project helps project managers obtain the resources that they need and find substitutes if some resources become unavailable.
- **Risks** Project managers can limit the impact of complications by identifying both potential risks and what can be done to manage them.
- **Other component plans** The day-to-day processes of a project are documented by plans, such as the communication, risk management, quality, and change control plans.

Project execution

Projects rarely adhere to the original schedule. Throughout the execution phase of a project, the project manager must be ready to answer the questions that stakeholders ask:

- Is the project on schedule?
- Is the project within budget?
- Is the project achieving the goals that we've set?
- If not, what are you, the project manager, going to do about it?

The project manager compares actual work and costs to the project plan to determine whether the project is behind schedule or over budget. Stakeholders want to know the projected dates for milestones, the amount of any budget overruns, and what resources will be requirements going forward.

Schedule, budget, and quality are the main considerations, but other factors can place a project in jeopardy. The project manager must also track and manage change requests, issues, and risks. If the project has fallen short in any way, the project manager must evaluate options and be prepared to recommend course corrections before things get out of hand.

Making information easy to obtain

In the past, project information resided in a project notebook, which often spanned dozens of binders. Today, technology improves upon the old project notebook, making it possible for team members to find the information that they need quickly and easily.

Project information still includes numerous documents created by using programs such as Microsoft Office Word 2003, Microsoft Office

Excel 2003, Microsoft Office Access 2003, and Microsoft Office Project Professional 2003. Choosing the best solution for storing project information involves several factors, among them project size, IT budget, and resources. The following are a few options for storing and distributing project information:

- **Microsoft Office Project Server 2003** Microsoft Office Enterprise Project Management software includes a feature for document libraries, so team members can find and review pertinent documents.
- **Shared Document Workspaces** If you don't use Office Project Server 2003, you can still employ Microsoft Windows SharePoint Services to create a common location for project documents.
- **A project folder on a shared drive** Storing project documents on a shared network drive is a simple solution to give document access to all team members. However, this approach has some limitations. For example, team members need information on where documents are located. In addition, change control is more difficult to implement.

Clearly, a focus on collaboration and communication will make you a more effective project manager and will help your team members and stakeholders save time and stay focused on results.

About the author [Bonnie Biafore](#) is a PMI (Project Management Institute)-certified Project Management Professional (PMP). She is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and award-winning author of several books about investing, personal finance, and project management, including *Troubleshooting Microsoft Project 2002* (Microsoft Press, 2002).

Original page: <http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/FX012291421033.aspx>

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